



Schools: locked down, separately...

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SCHOOLS: LOCKED DOWN, SEPARATELY



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On 12th March, from the steps of the President's Guest House in Washington, Leo Varadkar announced that schools across the Republic of Ireland would be closed to slow the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. His statement echoed concerns that had been raised by teaching unions and parents in Northern Ireland and increased pressure on the Assembly to follow suit. On 18th March, First Minister Arlene Foster declared that NI would be closing all schools with effect from Monday, 23rd March, a decision that was in line with directives issued in England, Scotland and Wales. In the days that followed this instruction was revised to permit school premises to re-open in a limited capacity in order to provide services for the children of key workers and vulnerable children (including those with a statement of educational special needs).

As the crisis has evolved, a multitude of local agencies have put aside commercial and professional rivalries and geared up to meet a shared need. Surgeries, social workers and supermarkets set about co-ordinating their services. The emergency had also seemingly provided an opportunity for schools of different types to come together in our famously fractured system to serve the whole of the community – irrespective of faith, community background, gender, perceived academic ability or class. Instructions from the Department of Education encouraged schools to co-operate and find innovative solutions

It would however seem that, even in the face of a threat so unfamiliar and universal that the word 'unprecedented' seems inadequate, sectoral barriers remain and that, in the era of lockdown, genuine collaboration between schools across the sectarian divide remains something of a no-go area. Even when faced with a global crisis the education system in Northern Ireland seems unable to overcome a parochial preoccupation with maintaining the separation between us and them.

There are just over 1,000 schools in NI and the Department of Education records that just over 400 of these have chosen to keep their premises open. The Department of Education has called for volunteers to assist in these schools, but the application form asks those applying to identify the sector in which they wish to be placed. You can choose to be a Protestant volunteer or a Catholic volunteer.

Of the schools that have remained physically open, 110 have decided to come together and co-operate to ensure provision for the identified pupils. Twenty-eight of these "clusters" registered with the Department of Education. Only a quarter of these include both state-Controlled and Catholic Maintained schools. Examples of cross-community school partnerships can be found in Banbridge and Craigavon, Clogher Valley, Antrim and Newtownabbey, and in Derry/Londonderry a post-primary partnership of grammar and non-selective schools has been set up covering the whole city – providing a shared educational service across all school types. Special Schools have continued to operate as they always have done, providing a service to the whole community regardless of social or religious background.

The spirit of cross-community co-operation has however been less evident elsewhere. In outer east Belfast for example Strathearn and Campbell College have formed a two-school cluster that would seem to be rooted in shared social class and community background. This cluster did not stretch to the involvement of non-selective, non-fee-paying Ashfield Boys or Ashfield Girls nor to the Catholic managed Our Lady and St Patrick's, Knock - all of which are less than two miles away.

There has never been a more pressing time for schools to collaborate and to show how they can react to exceptional challenges in non-sectoral ways, setting aside long-established class and religious divisions to provide support for learners. Yet school separation persists in spite of obvious benefits of working together for the common good. As we stand on our socially-distanced doorsteps on Thursday evenings do we applaud only those key workers with whom we share a community background? Nevertheless, our educational system, with some honourable exceptions, seems determined to keep our class and religious educational divisions in place even in such an exceptional time of need.

A few days before Covid-19 became the only news story across the media, the Northern Ireland Assembly voted to “*Urgently... establish an external, independent review of education provision, with a focus on securing greater efficiency in delivery costs, raising standards, access to the curriculum for all pupils, and the prospects of moving towards a single education system*”.

This crisis is demonstrating that whilst old barriers have been set aside in many walks of life, they remain persistent and pervasive within education. Their enduring nature prevents the most effective use of resources and emphasises the need for radical reform of our educational provision to deliver a more equitable system with all the social and economic benefits that will provide long after this crisis has passed.

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